

THE SOUND OF THE WHITE COLUMNS

By Marie Kølbaek Iversen

In March this year Swiss Institute had the great pleasure of presenting the extensive solo-project called 'Broadway', which had been created specifically for the institute by Danish artist, Jacob Kirkegaard.

Not only is the piece conceptually challenging, it also functions as a manifestation and an investigation of the structure and historical location of the Swiss Institute that is situated on Broadway in SoHo, New York. As it has also been the case in previous works of Kirkegaard, he uses the hidden sound-resources of an already existing location, which in this case is the sound of Broadway as it is mediated by the hollow, structural columns that run through the building's eight storeys.

The five columns - that are a visible part of the exhibition space - are the protagonists of the piece, and it is their subtle vibrations, recorded by means of a contact microphone and played back into each column through *exciters*, that constitute the core of the sound installation. An *exciter* is a sort of electro-acoustic vibrator capable of turning almost any kind of substance into a loudspeaker, when it is attached to it. In the installation at Swiss Institute, 12 exciters were attached to each of the five columns, making the columns play their own sound, which is the sound of Broadway, year 2007.

Kirkegaard's methodology is interesting, as what actually constitutes the piece is the *exhibition space* itself; in Broadway, it is the source, the method, the scene, and ultimately: the piece. This, of course, contradicts popular conception of the objective White Cube, which is thought of as a neutral framing for the art exhibited in it. To Kirkegaard the art space is just as specific a space as any other space, and thus, a possible subject to critical and artistic investigation; because, just as all other parts of the world, the art space is instrumental in the framing of our experiences in this world and therefore worthy of a discussion reflecting on the validity of its constitutional terminologies.

PERCEPTION AND HIDDEN SOUNDS

Jacob Kirkegaard is an artist whose focus it is to dive into the phenomena and spaces of interest to him and let each space 'speak for itself'. His tools are many and a lot of them related to science (accelerometers, hydrophones, electro-magnetic receivers, ultra-sound detectors and acoustical microphones) – they are all used to detect certain sounds that normally remain inaudible to the naked ear, but still exist hidden in the ground, deep within the nucleus of a nuclear power plant, in the silent spaces of abandoned houses and blowing in the wind around us.

Kirkegaard, born 1975, received his MFA in 2006 after having studied at the Academy of Media Arts in Cologne, Germany under the direct supervision of professor Siegfried Zielinski and professor Anthony Moore. Furthermore, he has been taught to play classic cello by Niels Erik Clausen for a period spanning from 1995 – 2000. The initial interest in sound and music was inspired by the guitar his father gave him when Jacob was only 12. This guitar along with the oriental instruments his father had collected on his many journeys, became the early starting point for Kirkegaard's musical and acoustical ventures that were soon to develop into an actual practice founded in a never-ending curiosity to become more than just acquainted with the core of the phenomenology of sound. This soon led him to carry out his research outside the domain of composed music rather than inside it.

Because, just as one can generate other sounds with a guitar than those of the strings - and those sounds can be perceived as pretty, even though one would probably hesitate to define them as 'guitar-play' – other phenomena of the world we live in, can be perceived and

enjoyed through the sense of hearing, even if they, conventionally speaking, are known as phenomena of either visual character or just random sounds generated by other activity - e.g. speeding up a car, which is rarely done with the purpose of generating sound but rather just to get going.

It was when Kirkegaard coincidentally came across early experimentalists like Pierre Schaeffer and the film-maker Walter Ruttmann that he found the conceptual precursors for his practice; a practice inspired by the world and the potential of this world to function as a source of sound that can be used directly as it is: rough, clean and unedited.

Schaeffer is known as the inventor of the term 'concrete music' (La Musique Concrète), while Ruttmann was carrying out his experiments in sound and (no) image 20 years before Schaeffer, and is especially known for his 'hörfilm' "Weekend", which simply consists of sound recordings made on a weekend in urban Berlin, year 1930.

MUSICAL OBJECTS

In my research I came across an interview with Pierre Schaeffer¹, where he explains the differences marking out the line between 'music' and 'sound'. Since Kirkegaard has placed himself conveniently in the centre of this discussion he is at the same time interesting and hard for the European *etablissement de la musique* to deal with, because it is difficult to label his pieces consisting of relatively unedited sound-recordings of various natural phenomena as 'music'.

In conducting his musical theory, Schaeffer was pre-occupied with what he called 'musical objects' (objets sonores) that are the musical structures, which enable us to perceive and decode music – and also categorise what we have heard as 'music' rather than just random sound. Those musical objects are, according to Schaeffer, based upon inherited conventions describing the circumstances that constitute a musical piece; how it is composed and what makes it appear harmonic. This is highly relevant to Kirkegaard's practice, as e.g. his album *Eldfjall*² consists of nothing else than the mere recordings of Icelandic soil and the sound that is audible when it is recorded by a contact microphone placed within this soil, close to the Icelandic geysers that emit sounds of volcanic activity right under the surface of the earth. As described by Daniella Cascella³: "Kirkegaard's album is an absolutely effective portrait of the chaos that generated everything, a meeting point for vital and destructive forces, threatening and regenerating at the same time".

Over time, different members of the international music press have uttered that an album like *Eldfjall* was hard to describe as music, since Kirkegaard had stepped aside as the artistic creator to in stead take the position of the medium transmitting the sounds of hidden acoustic spheres. What is subtly expressed through a critique like this is that Kirkegaard is possibly compromising his own position as an *artist* – a position based upon the individual fundamentally wanting to add something *new* to the world s/he is living in.

Critics will say that Kirkegaard's release does not fit within the musical conventions because it is Nature, not Kirkegaard, who is the real *creator* of the music for *Eldfjall*.

What is not included, and not comprehended, in such a critique, is the possibility that Kirkegaard is not interested in the position of the author. His agenda is rather to inspire his

¹ Recommended Records Quarterly magazine, volume 2, number 1, 1987 by Tim Hodgkinson

² Touch, 2005

³ 'Blind Sound' by Daniela Cascella. 'Sound Art', Resonance Magazine, London, June 2005

audience to be open to perceive the general relevance of the album – because, it is one thing to create something *new* (is it possible?), but it is something completely different to focus on and discuss something *interesting*. That ‘music’ as a term is based on inherited conventions, as Schaeffer suggests, is obviously compromising the overall idea that music can ever be *new* and groundbreaking, because it simply cannot be perceived if it does not correspond with musical tradition. This should be the final disarmament of the myth of the artist genius, since the very thought of it is based upon the artist’s unique ability to create something *new*; hence, a logical consequence of this problem would be to detach the *artist* from the *genius* and reconsider the expectations we, the audience, meet the arts with.

It is true that once an artist chooses to let the sound stand alone, unedited and clear, the audience and the critics are challenged if they expect themselves to be able judge the quality of the musical piece from the artist’s creativity as a composer. But, it is now clear to us that the essence of Kirkegaard’s creativity is stored elsewhere – that is: not in composition as such. It is rather his sensitivity towards the high potential of the earth and the world as sound-resources that is his largest strength; his unique ability to conceptualize the mediation of those hidden sound-resources in a way that makes the listener feel included and inspired to carry on the search for hidden sound-spheres her-/himself, making everyday-life seem less mundane.

THE SPECIFIC SPACE AND THE GALLERY

In November 2006, when I was invited to curate a project for the Swiss Institute in New York, I was very concerned with parallel-systems in the art-world that can be understood in analogy with Schaeffer’s distinction between ‘music’ and ‘sound’ – in the art-world as well as in music, there is a sort of filtering taking place determining whether the sensations one is subject to in the exhibition space are intended (art), or random phenomena irrelevant to the purpose of one’s visit. While your ear catches the sound of steps in the hallway, you smell the citrus-soap the cleaning lady has used to clean the floors – all the while you are looking at a photography hanging on the gallery wall – which sensation is the most important? – The photographic representation of a situation hanging on the wall? Or, the first-hand experience of the smells and sounds of the gallery space?

The 5 senses are our alarming system helping us to decide whether we are in danger or not – for this reason it is a sort of luxury, but also potentially confusing that we stimulate our senses to the extent it is seen with impressions serving an entertaining, exciting and/or pleasing purpose, because it blurs the differentiation we, human beings, have to make to be sure that we are safe. Our highly developed ability to differentiate helps us define what is important and what is irrelevant to us, and our existence: the surrounding world is important as far as it serves as the framework of our lives and presents us to people of similar and of different interests. The art object is important because someone said so – it was created with a purpose and a thought in mind and carries its justification within its shape and medium. But, the random phenomena such as sounds of speeding cars, objects in the street, shifts in weather etc. are possibly meaningless – or, it is up to every one of us to interpret them, experience them – provide them with meaning.

As I interpret the ideas of La Musique Concrete, its precursors and descendants, and like-minded people within the field of visual art, their interest is to encourage the listener/viewer to be equally awake when meeting the world as when experiencing art, which in the concept of La Musique Concrete is a selection of already existing phenomena rather than a newly designed piece developed for presentation within a neutral framing: in the art space.

The convention of the White Cube renders the actual space almost super-natural; it is thought of as an invisible 'non-space' transformable into an 'any-kind-of-space' by the installation of art-projects. But, just as it happened to witchcraft in fairy-tales and the hills of elves that were invisible and impossible to escape once one had entered, the neutral art space (the White Cube) is a mythical heritage from the past that has to stand the test against contemporary pragmatism to prove its validity and existence.

Thus, Jacob Kirkegaard was asked not to mediate sound from other acoustic spheres to the Swiss Institute's audience, but in stead to focus on the space in which the piece would be exhibited: the actual physical space of the Swiss Institute gallery. This was done in an attempt to reveal an underlying *nothingness* by means of his acoustical exorcism – to see if the gallery-space behind all the sounds resonating in it, would be this, and only this: a neutral, silent and objective space for exhibiting and experiencing art?

MYTHICAL NEW YORK AND THE STATE OF THE ART

The gallery-space at Swiss Institute is similar to other SoHo spaces that have undergone thorough restoration: it is a typical NYC-loft with high ceilings and large windows, the floor seems to be the original floor, and the space as a whole comes across as rough, but also elegant, with the white walls that at the ceilings leaves space for the naked brick walls to show. By designing the space this way, it seems that the architects have wished to tell us that there is no way a space with that location (495 Broadway, SoHo, NYC) will come across as neutral – New York is in your eyes, ears and mind when you walk in from the street and will without a doubt influence the experience you will get in the space. So, why bother, why not just walk the line and let New York shine through in all aspects of the interior architecture as well?

The gallery is split along the middle by a line of white columns running through all 8 storeys of the building. Since the building is mainly made and carried by cast iron, it clearly transmits the sounds of its surroundings, and especially of Broadway running at its feet with the subway-lines N,Q,R & W rumbling underground. This was the discovery that Jacob Kirkegaard made while going through the specifications of the space in November 2006: when listening to the columns he could easily hear how the building resonated with its surrounding: i.e. the capital of the Western world, New York, and its main street: Broadway! And, the idea for the sound-installation, Broadway, was conceived, as a reflection on the dubious objectivity of the exhibition space exemplified by the gallery at the Swiss Institute.

Our working thesis was that *'every space is a space of its own, a specific space with its own characteristics, pros and cons'* and the aim was to let the characteristics of the Swiss Institute gallery shine through, as exorcised by Kirkegaard's advanced method. His idea was simple but brilliant: to use a contact microphone to make a recording of the resonance transmitted by the columns and then amplify this resonance by means of exciters, making the columns play their own sound, which is the sound of Broadway and Soho and ultimately: the sound of New York.

SoHo, which is the abbreviation for the neighbourhood situated *South of Houston Street* in the lower part of Manhattan, is widely known to be the home of a line of underground- (later to become overground-) artists of the 70s and 80s; and, it is the memory of those days that has provided the area with its bohemian reputation: the place to live out the American Dream within an artistic context.

The idea of New York as an embracing refuge for cutting-edge art and artists is still recycled, even though the rent in SoHo - just as in the rest of NYC - has reached heights that make it impossible for anyone to live there unless s/he has a generous sponsor or is out of a rich family.

Today, the city and its development are governed by commercial interests, but it is still thought of as artistic, cutting-edge and bohemian.

It is therefore no surprise, but still striking that what you hear when you listen to the sound of the columns running through the Swiss Institute gallery, is not the audible reminiscent of past times' glamour, but in stead the well-known noise of an urban commercial district. And, it is the very essence of this, which underlines how times keep changing: the popularity and gentrification of the district has caused the move-out of the artists, who initially caused the area's popularity to rise. What is left now, is the tale and the memory of a reality belonging to the past, where SoHo was a place driven by artists' initiatives.

BROADWAY

For his project at the Swiss Institute, Jacob Kirkegaard chose to focus his piece on the acoustics of the space: that it is singing in resonance with its surroundings. As mentioned earlier, he recorded the resonance as conducted by the columns only to play these recordings back into the space through the columns on which he had attached a total of 60 exciters, 12 on each column, to make them oscillate, and thus amplify the recorded sound: the sound of Broadway. When you listen to the columns, you hear the sound of accelerating cars and the underground subway-traffic, and when recording these sounds you will get two very different gamuts of frequency: one that is very low at 0-100 Hz and a high-range one of 800-1000 Hz.

Since the piece, Broadway, is focusing on the columns and their mediation of the sounds of their surroundings, Kirkegaard chose to work with the gamut in the high end of the scale, because this would enable him to intensify this phenomenon and let the hollow columns fill the space with their metallic sound. Would he have chosen to work with the low frequencies, it would have applied a different angle to the piece and given it other connotations, as it would have affected the body quite violently making you feel the bass in your chest and stomach. Furthermore, it would have endangered the building that could ultimately collapse from the low frequency oscillations.

In the final piece, Broadway, the columns sing their own resonance out loud, pointing at the fact that both the columns and the space are hollow; empty spaces to be filled by what is going on around them. The piece that was exhibited at the Swiss Institute is nothing but a reflection on itself and the space that generated it.

This makes it extremely site-specific, as the concept would come across remarkably different if it was to be carried out and exhibited elsewhere. This disarms the myth of the completely neutral exhibition space, because the only thing that was exhibited was an *enforcement of the gallery space's own characteristics* – if it was a neutral space there would be no sound to record and amplify!

Hence, it is not only, as in La Musique Concrete, an abstraction of an actual sound-resource, but rather an enforcement of this sound-resource in its own surroundings.

Broadway is singing metallically and beautifully as the intensity of each column rises and falls independently of the others, and generally the sounds of the installation seem rather distinct from the known sounds of a machine-driven metropolis like New York.

Maybe we succeeded after all – but only through the filter of the arts and Kirkegaard's structured recordings – to reach the essence of the exhibition space, which is not a space of *nothingness*, but a specific space defined by the art that inhabits it. The sound of the singing columns is generated by the specific location of the Swiss Institute, and their song is the sound of the exhibition space – because, without the art in the space, their song would simply not be audible.

Thus, Kirkegaard succeeded in defining the essential characteristics of the art space through his piece: a space that communicates its art flexibly, but *not* neutrally.

This leads me to think that the neutral, objective art space is a *virtual space* rather than a physical one; a potential of our awareness that might be awakened by the right stimuli: visual art, books, music, news – of which the most important ones are exactly the ones, we ourselves think of as valuable. This virtual space is our own space, reachable through inspiration, and located somewhere between perception and the decision to take action.

Broadway and Kirkegaard's other pieces are an emphasis on this fact: that the greatest of all wonders is the fact that we exist, and that we are capable of experiencing and perceiving the world we are a part of. Just as Kirkegaard perceives and documents the sound of a gallery with his recording equipment, every one of us capture and store certain memories and experiences of value to us that become important when forming an opinion and taking a stand in life. When art is at its best is when the viewer becomes more than just an extra in the piece, when s/he is actually inspired to become an actively perceiving user of art-pieces, but most importantly: an active user of the world.